

# 2024 TOWN MEETING REPORT

REP. MONIQUE PRIESTLEY • ORANGE-2: BRADFORD, FAIRLEE & WEST FAIRLEE



## HOW TO CONTACT ME

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It is an honor to serve as your State Representative. A few personal highlights during my service this year that you might be interested in include being:

- selected for the 2023 National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Emerging Leaders Leadership Training Program in Philadelphia;
- selected for the 2024 Future Caucus Policy Innovation Lab Fellowship (with a focus on Strengthening Democracy);
- appointed by the Speaker of the House to the Joint Information Technology Oversight Committee;
- appointed by the Speaker of the House to the National Conference of State Legislatures Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity & Privacy;
- elected by a joint assembly of the Vermont House & Senate to serve as a Legislative Trustee for the University of Vermont;
- invited to sit on the keynote panel of the national Startup Champions Network 2023 Policy Summit in Washington, D.C.;
- invited to visit Ireland and Northern Ireland as a member of the American Irish State Legislators Caucus; and
- invited to this year's Vermont League of Cities & Towns Annual Meeting to stand with Rural Caucus leadership to accept the 2023 Legislative Service Award on behalf of the caucus.

Bills that I have been particularly invested in this session address gaps in consumer protection, support for entrepreneurs, and the future of work. Regulations in data privacy protections, design codes for software products targeting minors, and artificial intelligence systems have been bills where my particular skills and experience have come in handy in terms of research, resource networking, and education.

I would like to give a shout out to Evelyn Fleming, resident of Bradford and student at Mount Holyoke College. Without staff, legislative research can pile up. Evelyn chipped in with support as an intern for projects related to Right to Repair and Age Appropriate Design Code, in addition to other emergent issues. I am so excited to see where she takes her skills next!

Thank you to everyone who has invited me to meetings, speaking engagements, and reached out to explore the State House with me this year. Serving as your State Representative has been the most rewarding experience of my life and it has been a joy to share it with all those who have engaged. If you've been shy, please don't hesitate to be in touch with ideas, questions and concerns. I am here to help!

## 2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

We're halfway through the 2024 legislative session! Our work for the second year of this legislative biennium officially began on January 3rd. We've passed some significant legislation in these first two months, and this report provides highlights. Meanwhile, work on our key priorities will continue, across the House and in collaboration with the Senate, as we debate bills and consider investments prior to our anticipated May adjournment.

The legislature will tackle a wide range of issues in 2024. While none of these challenges can be solved in a single session, our priorities include:

- Passing and maintaining a fiscally responsible, balanced state budget that reflects our values and priorities and supports Vermonters in all 14 counties.
- Tackling the complex and interconnected challenges of housing and workforce development and supports.
- Enacting forward-looking, inclusive strategies to combat climate change and transition to a sustainable way of life, as we implement a plan to achieve emissions reduction requirements as outlined in the Global Warming Solutions Act.
- Creating affordable housing stock for Vermont's working families and combating homelessness statewide by modernizing zoning laws and increasing funding for construction.
- Supporting business stability and growth in all corners of Vermont, and increasing the capacity of our rural communities to access resources and plan for a vibrant future.

This is far from a comprehensive list. With 150 members and 13 standing committees, the House can accomplish a lot during our five months in Montpelier. And in all of this work, we'll center equity — thinking deeply and looking toward the future to enact legislation that protects the most vulnerable, boosts vitality in all 14 counties, and leaves no Vermonter behind.

## Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry

### Working for Working Lands

The Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency and Forestry passed two bills that support farmers and working lands.

H.603, which the House passed on a unanimous voice vote, aims to expand revenue options for poul-

try farmers who've previously been limited to selling whole birds due to inspection requirements for on-farm slaughter. The bill will allow farmers to sell parts of their birds at farmers markets, on the farm, and directly to customers or restaurants. Allowing farmers to package birds by breast, legs, thighs and wings better aligns with consumer demand and is more profitable for the farmer without any additional impact to the environment.

The committee also voted unanimously in favor of H.614, which protects homeowners from timber theft. The bill aims to stop unscrupulous loggers who take advantage of landowners by offering to cut down trees and promising a share of the harvest profits. The money is seldom retrieved and whole parcels are often clear cut without permission. The bill was sent to House Judiciary, where it also received a favorable vote.

### **School Meals: A Win-Win for Students & Farmers**

The pandemic and rising prices have resulted in record numbers of food-insecure families. Universal School Meals, enacted in 2023 to provide free lunch and breakfast to all Vermont students, has been hugely successful by several measures. The program has high participation rates among low-income students, so it's reducing child hunger. It's costing less than expected due in part to federal rule changes. And it complements the Local Foods Incentive Grant, which encourages school districts to buy ingredients from Vermont farms. The higher the percentage of local food purchased, the more a school district will be reimbursed by the state. This is a win-win for farmers and students.

We're also addressing food resiliency and school nutrition education with H.550. This bill would expand educational activities around farming, nutrition and farm-to-school food preparation, helping kids to understand where their food comes from through hands-on projects like school gardens and even poultry farming. Considering the average age of Vermont farmers is over 60, getting kids excited about farming is a great idea.

### **Protecting Pollinators**

Neonicotinoids are insecticides introduced in the 1990s that have proven to be highly toxic to bees and other pollinators. Neonics, as they're called, are used to prevent crop damage in a wide variety of grains, vegetables, fruits and turf grass, either by spraying or by coating seeds with the insecticide before planting. Treated seeds may release dust that can make its way into ground and surface water, and the plants

can contain toxic levels of neonics in their leaves and pollen. This leads to increased risks to birds, bees, and other insects, even at the 1-part-per-billion level. Neonics are also used on golf courses to keep grubs at bay and the greens and fairways pristine.

H. 706 would ultimately ban the use of neonic-treated seeds and most other applications. Extensive research indicates no significant crop yield loss when substituting untreated seeds. Quebec banned neonics in 2019, and New York State will begin phasing them out in 2027. By following the lead of our larger neighbor to the west, farmers should have access to a full complement of untreated seed varieties when the ban takes effect in Vermont.

## **Appropriations**

### **Budgeting to Meet the Needs of Vermonters**

In the first half of the legislative session, the Appropriations Committee prepares the FY24 budget adjustment—a "true up" of the current state budget that reflects actual revenues and new cost pressures midway through the fiscal year. The committee also takes testimony from all state agencies and develops the FY25 state budget.

During the pandemic, Vermont received an enormous amount of federal money. That funding is now spent or obligated, and the House is making sure every last federal dollar is used effectively to create a more resilient Vermont. We are also coming to grips with new cost pressures and needs.

The budget adjustment process—and now the FY25 budget process—are shaped by three realities. First, unlike in recent years, we do not have pandemic federal funds to rely on. Second, we're still trying to help our neighbors in flood-stricken communities. Third, the committee's review of proposed state agency budgets reveals underfunded and fragile organizations in need of critical support. This translates to workforce shortages, agencies that can't provide the services Vermonters need, upward pressure on wages for state workers, and IT systems so outdated they make it hard for employees to do their jobs. In several cases, we're leaving tens of millions of federal dollars on the table because we have not invested in core systems that would make us eligible to access those dollars.

Despite the challenges, we're celebrating significant success stories. For example, Vermont is on track to push high-speed Internet access to all corners of the state. Flood damage was less severe than it might have been due to previous investments in resilience.



Families across the state are signing up to access new childcare subsidies, the result of last year's historic legislation.

As we grapple with this year's budget challenges, we're working hard to put dollars behind our priorities. The House budget will make sound investments to enhance the stability and effectiveness of state government, while making sure we fund strategic priorities like flood recovery, housing, public safety and climate resilience. Our goal is to create a budget that meets the needs of Vermonters, at a cost they can afford. We are taking care to make sure Vermont is a place all people can thrive, not just the select few.

## **Commerce & Economic Development**

### **Protecting Your Data: States Take the Lead**

Every day we disclose, intentionally or not, a tremendous amount of personal information. Beyond what we share or "like" on social media, search engines, cell phones, health trackers, stores (both online and physical) and other data brokers are collecting not just our names, addresses, and Social Security numbers, but also our shopping habits, blood pressure, gait and sleep quality, fingerprints, our travel routes and the places we visit, who our friends are and their interests, and so much more. This personal and biometric data belongs to us, yet it is harvested, packaged and sold by—and sometimes stolen from—these data brokers without our knowledge or permission.

The federal government has failed to act on this issue, so 14 states have passed legislation to protect consumer privacy, our personal identification, and most importantly our children's data. Another ten states, including Vermont, are working on data privacy bills. Building on the work done in states across the country, like Connecticut and California, the House is creating H.121—a data privacy bill that works for Vermonters, is right-sized for Vermont businesses, and aligns with other states in our region.

### **Boosting Vermont's Skilled Workforce**

Vermont continues to have a significant workforce shortage, especially when it comes to skilled workers. In recent years, the legislature has taken steps to upskill our current workforce and encourage skilled workers from other states to work and live in Vermont. We have significant ongoing needs in the areas of healthcare, construction and education. In response, the legislature recently created and funded

a nurse preceptor grant program and several initiatives aimed at our teacher workforce.

This year, the House is crafting its latest workforce development bill, H.707. It will include an overhaul of the Workforce Development Board's composition and the creation of a task force to study proposed workforce data management models—both recommended by the Special Oversight Committee on Workforce Expansion and Development created last year. We also expect to make workforce investments in the FY25 state budget.

### **Consumer Protection: Vehicle Towing & Storage**

H.143 provides consumer protection related to the towing and storage of vehicles. Like most Vermont businesses, the vast majority of towing companies are reputable, hard-working folks providing a vital service to Vermonters. But the industry is unregulated, so abuses do happen: predatory towing, arbitrary towing fees, and exorbitant vehicle storage fees. Witnesses reported paying \$600-900 to retrieve a towed vehicle. As work on this bill moves forward, the committee is considering different towing situations—for example an accident versus a parking violation—as well as issues involving vehicle storage, safety and owner access.

## **Corrections & Institutions**

### **Building a Successful Corrections System**

The number of incarcerated individuals in Vermont's corrections system has remained stable in recent years — a little more than 1,300 individuals are incarcerated in Vermont at any given time. Over 90% of this population has been diagnosed with a chronic medical condition, and for well over 60%, one of those conditions is substance use disorder. The mission of Vermont's Department of Corrections (DOC) is to rehabilitate and prepare these individuals for success in the community. While some have long sentences, most incarcerated adults will complete their sentence within a few years.

Working to meet the needs of justice-involved individuals is a key policy area for the Corrections & Institutions Committee. We are progressing with plans to design a new trauma-informed women's facility that's focused on successful re-entry. Site selection is underway, and design and planning will unfold over the next several years.

Creating educational opportunities is another bright spot in corrections policy. Today, 90 incarcerated individuals are taking seven different CCV classes at

three correctional facilities. Another 29 correctional officers are enrolled through the federally supported program and are taking classes on the outside—offering a great perk for our hardworking correctional staff.

The legislature is encouraging DOC to take a closer look at re-entry planning and continuity of crucial services. We want to avoid lapses in healthcare and prescriptions. Innovative solutions include a pilot project to bring community-based recovery coaching into our correctional facilities, and then providing continuous recovery support to those reentering the community.

### **Crucial Infrastructure: Adjusting the Two-Year Capital Bill**

In addition to our flood recovery efforts, the House Corrections and Institutions Committee is actively involved in adjusting the two-year, \$203 million Capital Bill. This legislation creates crucial infrastructure investments for Vermont, and it covers a range of projects aimed at supporting public services and boosting economic growth.

Recognizing the need to carefully invest public funds, the committee is reviewing project status updates and adjusting allocations. Our goal is to direct resources to initiatives that best serve Vermonters' needs and priorities. For example, the Vermont Veterans home in Bennington, which offers housing capacity for 138 veterans, is partly supported by funds from the Capital Bill for major maintenance. Major maintenance and repairs to our 29 state-owned historic sites are also funded through the Capital Bill.

### **Flood Recovery for our State Capital**

The State House in Montpelier and the Capitol Complex are the seat of Vermont's government. The three branches of government—the Legislature, Governor, and Judiciary—all have their main offices in historic buildings in downtown Montpelier, and historic and unique buildings also house Vermont's constitutional officers (Treasurer, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Auditor).

The July 10 flood that devastated Montpelier did not spare the Capitol Complex. Every office and branch of government was affected, and we are all working together to bring buildings and offices back online.

All but four State buildings affected by the flood have reopened, and the House Corrections & Institutions committee has been working with the state's architects and engineers to review the scope of flooding damages and plan for repairs.

The price tag will be significant, but insurance payouts and FEMA will help with a 90% match. Considering the likelihood that these buildings could flood again, here's good news: previous flood mitigation measures worked. We can rebuild using measures that will be less prone to flood damage next time.

## **Education**

### **School Construction Aid: Taking the Next Steps**

Vermont's school buildings need more than \$6 billion in investments statewide to bring them up to date, replace worn-out systems, achieve code compliance, and replace buildings that would be cheaper to rebuild than repair. Unfortunately, the state has not managed a program to assist school districts in paying for major capital projects since 2007, and some districts have struggled to pass bonds.

The House Education Committee is creating a bill—based on recommendations of a fall 2023 task force—to restart a state aid program that would share the cost of construction projects, with incentive contributions toward annual bond payments. The proposed program could be vital to districts while not affecting Vermont's pristine bond rating. While the program will take time to develop, the bill would provide immediate help to districts through grants and technical expertise for long-range planning. Meanwhile, the legislature will develop financing details and an incentive system.

### **Cost-Sharing for Education Services**

Act 46 of 2016 at first encouraged, and then required, school districts to unify as a way to better serve students and manage costs. Building on this progress, the House Education Committee is considering a bill that would allow school districts to collaborate on common needs such as specialized student services, joint supply procurement or regional busing contracts. Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) are common in other states, and are expected to be popular in Vermont once the legislature creates legislation to allow districts to form these legal entities. BOCES could conceivably provide highly specialized services that some students must now access in other states. The basic concept is strength and economy in numbers.

### **Bending the Education Cost Curve**

The unprecedented 2024 school budget increases have prompted the House Education Committee to begin taking exhaustive testimony from educators, researchers, school boards and many others about

the future of Vermont education. As a state, how can we provide a high-quality education while controlling costs?

The end of federal pandemic-era funding—coupled with increased student needs, rising healthcare expenses, and employee contracts that reflect inflation—have all contributed to spiraling costs and tax rate increases not seen in recent history. Everyone agrees that now's the time to look at long-term strategies to tackle either the cost of education, our complex funding formula, or both. It's not yet clear what this deep dive into school finance and educational needs will yield, but the current trend is untenable and is hurting Vermonters' ability to afford the state as a home.

## **Environment & Energy**

### **Updating Vermont's Renewable Energy Standard**

Vermont's Renewable Energy Standard, an energy policy passed in 2015, put Vermont's electric utilities on the path to cleaner electricity from renewable sources like hydro, solar and wind. Since then, the state has committed to transitioning away from fossil fuels, joining the global call to action to reduce carbon emissions and protect our future. Now, with historic federal funding available for clean energy, Vermont is set to make major progress over the next decade.

H.289 reflects a remarkable collaboration among Vermont's electric utilities and environmental groups to bring more renewable energy into our grid faster. The updated Renewable Energy Standard raises electric utility requirements for renewable energy to 100% by 2030 for most utilities, with a longer time-frame (2035) for smaller, rural utilities. The bill doubles the amount of new renewable energy built in the state, bringing on good-paying clean energy jobs and better protection from rising fossil fuel energy prices.

To make sure all Vermonters have access to the benefits of renewable energy, the bill also includes a study on current and needed programs for affordable housing developments and customers with lower incomes.

### **Modernizing Act 250**

With the housing crisis and threats from a changing climate becoming dire, the legislature launched a deep examination of how to better protect our communities, air, water, wildlife, forests and working lands. Since 1970, our statewide land use law, Act 250, has helped support compact development in down-

towns and village centers while protecting forests and open lands. Last summer, a working group convened by the Natural Resources Board collaborated on needed updates to Act 250 to facilitate building in the right places and better protect natural resources. After months of work, consensus emerged on several important updates.

H.687 is a comprehensive bill that weaves together recommendations from the Act 250 working group with related regional planning and statewide designation program updates. The bill seeks a balanced approach to improving the effectiveness and consistency of the Natural Resources Board in issuing Act 250 permits and handling appeals. It proposes a new location-based oversight that defines three "tiers" covering downtowns and village centers (tier 1), rural areas (tier 2) and the most ecologically sensitive areas (tier 3). The House Environment and Energy Committee is hearing from many witnesses as it fine-tunes these areas and incorporates ideas from related bills.

## **General & Housing**

### **Housing: A Ten-Year Plan to Tackle Homelessness**

In early February, Chris Donnelly of the Champlain Housing Trust, one of the state's leading nonprofit affordable-housing developers, delivered an important and thorough report. It laid out a transformative ten-year plan for Vermont to create enough units, and provide the necessary support services, to keep our lowest-income Vermonters housed. The model calls for 300 new shelter or other beds for unhoused individuals and families, 7,500 additional homes and apartments of varying types, eviction prevention resources, and social services that these vulnerable Vermonters need. The House General and Housing Committee is developing a bill, H.829, based on this framework. At a projected price tag of \$200 million per year, this strategic investment could transform Vermont's affordable-housing landscape while saving lives (and money in the long run).

### **Fighting for Housing Funding**

The legislature has always made decisions based on the budget as suggested by the governor. But this year's proposed budget falls woefully short of the \$200 million required to stem the flow of people becoming homeless and remaining without adequate shelter, plus a reduction of funding for housing development overall. Act 250 reform, while important, cannot solely solve this crisis; long-term commit-

ment will.

House General and Housing has also been exploring how to shore up housing through policy. We have taken a look at discrimination against people with unstable housing status and what that means for their ability to work and to obtain housing; we are helping to refine the structure and rules for the Vermont Housing Improvement Program; we are working on ways to assist Vermonters facing eviction during this housing crisis; and we are working to create permanent upstream eviction preventions.

### **Updating Our Anti-Discrimination Laws**

In late February, the House passed H.132, a bill that would add housing status to Vermont's key anti-discrimination laws, including the Fair Housing Act and the Fair Employment Practices Act. H.132 would prevent employers from refusing to hire someone—or landlords from refusing to rent an apartment to someone—if they are otherwise qualified but perceived to be homeless. Vermont laws already prohibit this kind of discrimination against members of many protected classes, including race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. The bill, which passed on a near-unanimous voice vote, will now move to the Senate. In H.363, we prohibited racial discrimination based on hair types, textures and styles; this bill passed on a near-unanimous vote and is off to the Senate for consideration.

### **Equity: The Work Continues**

The House General and Housing Committee has taken a look at several equity-related bills this session, including pay transparency, discrimination definitions, mental health supports for emergency workers and first responders, equal pay protections, and expanding the jurisdiction of the Human Rights Commission.

The committee shored up equity provisions passed through previous legislation, but not supported financially through the governor's proposed FY25 budget. We've worked alongside members of the Appropriations Committee to identify programs left unfunded or under-funded in the budget, so we can continue the important work we've set into motion. This includes funding for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Land Access and Opportunity Board, and the Human Rights Commission.

## **Government Operations & Military Affairs**

The House Government Operations and Military Affairs has jurisdiction over many different areas including, but not limited to: elections, municipal government issues, open meeting laws, public safety, IT, the Cannabis Control Board, and the Department of Liquor and Lottery.

### **Broadening Our Commitment to Ethics**

Two of the big bills coming out of the committee this year are all about government ethics. One bill relates to elected officials for state and county offices, and expands the State Ethics Commission's role so that they can investigate and hold hearings in response to Vermonters' complaints. The goal here is to increase transparency and accountability, which will increase the Vermont public's trust in state government, which will help us all work together in a meaningful way.

The statewide ethics bill also broadens the scope of disclosures required of state and county elected officials. It expands current laws to require candidates to disclose individual stock holdings above \$25,000, as well as reveal any known contracts with the state as the course of regular business for themselves or their spouse or domestic partner.

In order to encourage timely participation, the bill imposes fines on candidates who fail to file their campaign finance information on time. It also gives the State Ethics Commission the authority to investigate complaints, hold confidential hearings, and should they find it appropriate, they'll be able to issue warnings, reprimands, recommend follow-up actions, and facilitate mediation to find a satisfactory resolution.

The other bill focuses on municipal ethics, and provides a clear path for concerned Vermonters to register complaints regarding municipal officials' ethics. This starts with a uniform Code of Ethics for all municipalities: with this in place, everyone will be coming from the same place regarding conflict of interest, favoritism, financial conflicts, and other issues that regularly come up in the course of a citizen government. Respect for the officials' confidentiality is important, so while the State Ethics Commission reviews these complaints, they will remain confidential, although the results will be made public.

### **Law Enforcement & Public Safety (Act 30 & PR1)**

Last year we focused a lot of attention on law enforcement training and accountability, as well as a model financial policy for sheriffs through S.17 and other bills focused on public safety. That work is continuing, with efforts like increasing courthouse



security as well as improved training programs and recruitment for law enforcement. The Vermont Criminal Justice Council has made progress modernizing training and is hosting the largest classes ever at the police academy to fill law enforcement positions across the state.

In response to several high profile issues with Sheriffs offices across the state, Act 30 (S.17) required a number of reforms, including audits and model financial policy to be adopted. It clarifies that sheriffs should avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest and specifies what information should be made public. It also requires sheriffs to participate in Vermont's Code of Ethics Policy. The model policy for sheriff departments compensation and benefits and a new Director of Sheriff Operations are rolling out now.

The Senate is soon voting on a constitutional amendment, PR1, which the committee will take up after the Town Meeting break. PR1 will give the general assembly the power to set qualifications to run for and hold county positions like sheriff and states attorney, ensuring that we have objective standards for who can serve in these important positions. We shouldn't permit decertified law enforcement officers or disbarred attorneys to serve in these roles, but that is allowed under the current constitutional language.

### **Democracy & Open Meetings (Act 1 & S.55)**

The committee's first order of business this session was to extend covid-era Open Meeting Law policies for another year with Act 1. We're following up on this with a more in-depth and permanent consideration of Open Meeting Law with S.55. One major portion of this bill is figuring out which meetings will require a physical location (not solely held remotely), whether remote access should be offered, and whether or not a hybrid model should or even could be required for meetings. It's critical to the future of our democracy that we choose appropriate standards that allow the most public access from local meetings all the way to state boards and commissions.

## **Health Care**

### **H.721: Medicaid Expansion Act of 2024**

With 80 co-sponsors, H.721 represents the most ambitious effort to improve Vermonters' access to affordable health care in over a decade. While most Vermonters already have some form of health insurance, too many are under-insured: with sky-high deductibles and punishing co-pays, they cannot

afford to use the insurance they do have and delay getting lower-cost preventative primary care. Inevitably, symptoms worsen and they wind up in our overburdened and high-cost hospital emergency rooms. Most parts of this bill will be undergoing a technical analysis so we know the exact cost—and to determine if federal dollars can lessen the burden on Vermont taxpayers. Among its many innovative provisions, this bill will:

- Expand Medicaid eligibility to all Vermonters with incomes up to 312% of the federal poverty level.
- Prevent older Vermonters on Medicaid from falling off of the Medicare benefits "cliff" by expanding eligibility for Medicare Savings Plans.
- Mirror current private insurance plans by allowing young Vermonters to keep their Dr. Dynasaur benefits until age 26.
- Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates to our providers so they can keep their doors open to all patients.
- Give small business owners an affordable option to provide their employees with health insurance through the Medicaid program.

### **Mental Health Crisis Response**

Mental health is a cornerstone of health in Vermont and a priority this legislative session. To respond effectively and respectfully to the mental health needs of all Vermonters, we're focusing on crisis response and community-based programs—specifically mental health urgent care, mobile crisis response, and the 988 suicide and crisis lifeline.

Currently, Vermont has six mental health urgent care programs. This includes four brick-and-mortar centers providing psychiatric urgent care for both children and adults. In addition to these centers, there are two "living room models" that are designed to feel like a welcoming space where guests feel safe and meet with teams to get support. These provide alternatives to emergency departments.

A new statewide mobile crisis response also helps people experiencing a mental health or substance use crisis by providing mental health and welfare checks in lieu of police intervention. Services are delivered by two-person teams in the community, referring individuals to other forms of care as needed.

Connecting it all is the 988 Vermont Suicide and Crisis Lifeline that responds to calls, texts, and chats 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Through these and other programs, we are making sure there is always someone to call, someone to respond, someone to



prevent, and somewhere to go.

## Human Services

### **Act 76: Historic Support for Child Care & Early Childhood Education**

Last year, the legislature passed Act 76—a first-of-its-kind, long-term investment in our child care and early learning system that will provide access to affordable, quality child care and early learning for thousands of young Vermonters and help make Vermont more affordable for families.

Act 76 is underway right now, and we're already seeing signs of progress across the state. Child care programs in every county have increased staff compensation and benefits, improved and expanded their programs, and created new child care slots.

Act 76 doesn't stop there: In April and again in October, the state will expand eligibility for child care tuition assistance for families. By the end of 2024, more than 7,000 additional children and their families will be eligible for free or reduced tuition rates. Families can find the new income guidelines effective April 2024 at the Child Development Division website.

Act 76 also tasks Building Bright Futures, the state's early childhood advisor, with tracking outcomes of Act 76. Legislators will use this data to inform future child care policy. Vermonters can follow the progress of this historic legislation on the Child Development's website.

### **Preventing Overdose & Saving Lives**

The House passed H.72 earlier this year, which deals explicitly with overdose prevention centers. In the face of 2023 being another record-breaking year for overdoses and overdose deaths, this bill would establish a pilot program for two overdose prevention centers to combat overdose deaths.

Overdose prevention centers are places where, under medical supervision, people can use substances that pose an overdose risk. Additionally, these pilot centers will:

- Provide a space supervised by health care professionals and other trained staff
- Supervise the use of substances that the individual has acquired elsewhere (the center will not provide them)
- Provide medical care, including wound care
- Provide harm reduction supplies (sterile needles, etc.)

- Provide referrals to addiction treatment, medical services, and social support services
- Provide secure disposal of hypodermic needles
- Educate individuals on proper needle disposal
- Educate individuals on the risks associated with substance use
- Provide education on prevention
- Distribute overdose reversal medications

This epidemic is a public health crisis, and we need to continue to act to save lives and support communities. The bill is under consideration by the Senate.

### **S.18: Regulating Contents of E-Cigarettes & Tobacco**

Vermont spends more than \$400 million annually to treat tobacco-related illnesses, including more than \$90 million each year in Medicaid expenses. Research indicates that candy-flavored e-cigarettes like grape, bubble gum, gummy bear, and strawberry are hooking Vermont youth. 89% of Vermont youth between the ages of 12 and 17 who smoke or vape started with a flavored product.

Youth tobacco substitute use is growing. Seven percent of Vermont high school students smoke cigarettes, but when you add in e-cigarettes, the number jumps to 28%. S.18 would ban the retail sale of all flavored vapes, all flavored tobacco substitutes, and all flavored e-liquids.

The tobacco industry targets its advertising and marketing efforts for menthol cigarettes specifically to attract African Americans and the LGBTQ population. S.18 delays a ban on all menthol cigarettes and menthol tobacco products by six months, pending a review by Vermont's Health Equity Commission.

S.18 will not ban other flavored tobacco products such as cigars, little cigars, snuff, or shisha, helping us stay closely aligned with federal laws that have banned all flavored cigarettes except menthol. Also, research does not show a clear connection between youth switching from e-cigarettes to these other tobacco products.

S.18 has passed out of the House Human Services Committee and will be coming to the House floor in the coming weeks.

## Judiciary

### **Public Safety: Shoring up the System**

Public safety has been the theme for the House Judi-

ciary Committee this session. Almost every bill we've taken up is connected to the crimes and conditions that contribute to the sense that Vermonters are not as safe as we were just a few years ago.

The two most effective crime deterrents are 1) a high probability of being caught and 2) certain and quick consequences for criminal activity. The probability of being caught depends on the presence and availability of law enforcement. The certainty and immediacy of consequences depends on a well-functioning, well-resourced criminal justice system made up of the courts, prosecutors, defenders, victim advocates, and restorative justice providers.

The legislature's primary lever to address the issue is the state budget. The Judiciary Committee continues to work with the Appropriations Committee to ensure that all vital elements of the justice system have sufficient resources. This work will enable cases to be heard in a timely fashion so that individuals are being held accountable for their actions as soon as possible.

In addition to advocating for properly resourced criminal justice entities, we've voted several public safety-related bills out of the House and on to the Senate.

### **Expanded Protection for Victims of Domestic Violence**

Forty percent of all calls to Vermont law enforcement for violent crimes are related to domestic violence. This fact alone means any attempt to improve public safety must include efforts to prevent and address domestic violence.

H.27 is one such step. It adds "coercive controlling behavior" to the definition of abuse in the civil statute, making it something for which victims may request a relief from abuse order—commonly referred to as an "RFA."

During testimony, we heard chilling accounts of coercive controlling behavior that ultimately preceded physical violence, including domestic homicide. In one case, a woman's husband removed the seats from the family minivan because he knew his wife would not drive her children anywhere in an unsafe vehicle. His act served to isolate her in their rural Vermont home, and meant that she had no way to escape. He later killed her and their children.

Current law requires seekers of relief from abuse orders to be physically harmed or in fear of imminent physical harm. The aim of this bill is to provide a pathway out of an abusive situation before physical

violence occurs.

### **A Statewide Approach to Restorative Justice**

House Judiciary devoted a considerable amount of time to H.645, an act relating to the expansion of approaches to restorative justice. This bill seeks to codify the practice of pre-charge referrals to restorative justice providers—something we are calling "pre-charge diversion" because it mirrors the existing (post-charge) diversion program administered by the Attorney General's office.

Pre-charge diversion offers both responsible parties and victims an alternative to the traditional criminal justice system. It has the potential to help reduce the court backlog by not adding cases to the pipeline. It can also produce better results with more accountability and consequences closer to the commission of the crime. The bill also sets up improved data collection.

We took great care to honor prosecutorial discretion while making progress toward a statewide vision of restorative justice that ensures geographic equity. We've also worked diligently to protect victims' rights and bring a currently functioning-yet-fractured system together for the benefit of all Vermonters.

### **Addressing Retail & Motor Vehicle Theft**

House Judiciary focused on a bill designed to address retail theft, specifically repeat offenses. Currently, retail theft offenses can be charged as either misdemeanors or felonies depending upon the value of goods stolen. Anything up to \$900 is a misdemeanor; over \$900 is a felony. H.534 would enable prosecutors to charge individuals with a felony if the aggregate value of goods stolen within a 14-day period exceeds \$900, or if the person acted in concert with someone else.

Given the complex nature of the problem and the co-occurring challenges of substance use disorder, poverty, mental illness, and a significant court backlog, there is no single solution. We are committed to finding a path forward that makes things better for retailers and communities, considers the long-term implications of a felony conviction, and plays a part in addressing the court backlog.

House Judiciary combined three bills dealing with motor vehicle theft, unlawful operation, and trespass into one: H.563. This bill is designed to close a few gaps in statute, including the interesting fact that current law does not prohibit a person from entering another person's car without consent. This will address incidents of rummaging through someone's

car without actually stealing anything out of it. Accidental entry into another's car will not be criminalized.

### **Changes to Judicial Nominating**

H.780 makes important changes to the judicial nominating process. The way it works now is that a nonpartisan Judicial Nominating Board (made up of legislators, members of the Vermont Bar, and people appointed by the governor) sends nominations for judicial openings to the governor. The governor then reviews and appoints judges from the list of nominees.

Current law does not specify whether or how many times a governor can ask the Judicial Nominating Board to produce an additional list of candidates if they are not pleased with the list as presented. This bill clarifies that a governor may only ask for a new list of candidates one time, which could help expedite the appointment process.

This bill also creates a mechanism by which folks could nominate potential judges, a change from existing law which only allows for self-selecting into the pool of would-be judges. It's a way to potentially increase diversity in the applicant pool by combating the well-proven phenomenon of women, people of color, and other historically marginalized people failing to see themselves in positions of power, and therefore never offering their own name.

## **Transportation**

### **Addressing Climate Change & Resiliency Through Transportation**

The issue of climate change, and what we must do to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, is one of our most pressing challenges. The July 2023 flooding demonstrated that the threat of climate change is not in the distant future but is impacting Vermont today. We must not only reduce emissions, but adapt to climate change and build resilience.

In Vermont, our transportation sector contributes nearly 40% of our total carbon pollution. To reduce CO2 emissions, we must develop and sustain a transportation system that serves all Vermonters today and in a changing future. This session legislators have introduced H.693, the Transportation Infrastructure and Resiliency Act, which aims to provide more affordable, accessible and reliable EV charging, mobility and transit options to help Vermonters get around more easily, walkable and bikeable communities and funding to reduce community vulnerability

and mitigate future damage.

Building more resilient transportation infrastructure enables Vermonters to access jobs, age successfully in our communities, and improve our health as we reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions.

### **Incentives for Electric Vehicles & E-Bikes**

A variety of incentives for electric vehicles and electric bikes are helping Vermonters transition away from gasoline-powered vehicles. There are up to \$6,000 in incentives plus \$7,500 in tax credits available. The [driveelectricvt.com](https://driveelectricvt.com) website is a great resource with details about the incentives, a tool to compare vehicles and information about electric vehicle charging.

### **Grant Opportunities for Communities**

This year's Bicycle and Pedestrian Grant Program will provide an additional \$4 million in funding for communities. The Bicycle and Pedestrian Program improves access and safety for bicyclists and pedestrians through the planning, design and construction of infrastructure projects. This VTrans program opens for applications in the spring of each year.

## **Ways & Means**

### **Taxation as a Reflection of Our Values**

The Ways and Means committee relies on values that help us serve all Vermonters through an equitable and evolving tax system. Our values are:

- **Progressivity:** Tax policies that ensure Vermonters contribute a fair share of their resources to support the important functions of government.
- **Adequacy:** Policies that raise enough revenue to fund the public structures that create opportunity for all Vermonters.
- **Equity:** At times, policy has fostered inequitable outcomes for protected classes of citizens. Our tax policies advance economic opportunity for all Vermonters.
- **Viability:** Tax policy has a viable path towards enactment in the legislature and is defensible to taxpayers.

With these values in mind, Ways and Means is working to fully fund school budgets—which have been considered and approved by local voters—in a way that reduces impacts on Vermont property taxpayers. We've also worked to modernize and bring equity to our property tax system by updating our appraisal system, abating properties impacted by flooding, modernizing decades-old telecom taxes, and plan-



ning for climate resilience in a way that draws down federal dollars.

Our primary purpose is to meet Vermont's revenue needs in a fiscally responsible way. That includes making sure that our revenues are strong and sustainable and that all Vermonters are contributing their fair share. Our tax structure is the bedrock of a strong state.

### Tax Resources for Vermonters

This year, the Ways & Means Committee has had a theme of helping Vermonters understand the options available to help reduce their tax burden, and how to navigate challenges they may have with the tax system in Vermont.

Why file? Even if your income is below the threshold to file a return, you still should! There are credits and incentives available that can save a lot of money. First, if you are a homeowner you should file a homestead declaration. Two thirds of Vermonters are eligible for income-based property tax relief and filing the homestead declaration is the way to receive that discount.

Also, you may be eligible for some tax credits. There are dozens of credits, but two of our largest are the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The EITC is meant to offset taxes paid by low-wage earners, and the CTC offers a per-child amount to families.

Need help filing taxes to receive these important benefits? Taxpayers can find free tax preparation help near them with a simple search:<https://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep/>. Both AARP and Vermont Income Tax Assistance are two additional free resources for tax preparation.

Finally, Vermont's Taxpayer Advocate is employed to help Vermonters navigate their tax challenges; reach out at (802) 828-6848 or [tax.taxpayeradvocate@vermont.gov](mailto:tax.taxpayeradvocate@vermont.gov).

